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INTELLIGENCE

A Proposal for Reform

by Ernest Volkman

During his tenure as CIA director, Admiral Stansfield Turner once commissioned a former navy colleague for what Turner believed would be about a one-week job: taking an independent look at the American intelligence community's entire security classification (and code-word) system in an attempt to arrive at a new system.

Actually, the job turned out to be so complicated, it took nearly half a year. And in the end, what emerged was a massive system of code-words and sources pegged to those with "need to know" certain information. The system was not only hopelessly complicated, it was useless as well; as things turned out, neither Turner nor the consultant were cleared to know some of the code words, and a huge chart graphically demonstrating the system could not be reproduced in the CIA since no one at the agency was cleared to know all of its components. Ultimately, it led to the formation of the so-called "Royal" special security system — first revealed via newspaper leaks, much to the bemused reactions of Washington policymakers.

The incident is symptomatic of much that is wrong with the modern American intelligence community: an obsession with structure over form, bureaucratic nose-picking, and an unhealthy concern with technology, to the exclusion of function. It is chiefly symptomatic, of course, of that central bane, bureaucracy, best exemplified by the code-word nightmare. Indeed, there is cause for some wonder at how Turner's consultant managed to pick his way through the labyrinth. How did he manage, for example, to understand why there are things marked ORCON, which means that permanent federal employees can look, but not contractors? Or how certain code words will denote material to be seen only by, say, the navy, but not by any other military service?

This is not an article about the intelligence community's code-word and security classification system — that subject would fill a dense volume, provided it could even be understood — but the concern here is about what can be done to reform the American intelligence community. As we have seen in this series of articles, that community for quite some time has been operating in something of an information/intelligence explosion, an explosion of data for which the intelligence community is largely responsible. But the name of the game has been how the intelligence has been used.

Summarily, the record is spotty, at best, on this point. There have been (and still are) too many policymakers who use intelligence as a drunk uses a lamppost — not for illumination, but as a crutch. This explains why a certain kind of intelligence is continually most attractive to policymakers: the intelligence, carefully worded and subtly tailored, either tells somebody what he wants to hear or confirms an already well-established policy position. The most unfortunate development in modern intelligence has been the subordination of intelligence to institutional and operational interests — and even more unfortunately the fact is that the intelligence community has all too often acquiesced in this sort of self-delusion, which we might summarize as the ancient pursuit of the agreeable, rather than the disagreeable.

To a certain extent, the American intelligence community has abrogated its fundamental responsibility of providing light in a world clouded by complexity and the noise of the information explosion. The sea of paper, generated these days in terms of sheer quantity, is beyond the capacity of its audience to absorb it. This sea concerns a dangerously volatile world, and no better mandate for the intelligence community exists than the task of understanding just how volatile it is, what dangers exist, and what can be reasonably anticipated in a time of disorderly change, violence, terror, totalitarian revolution and war. There is a pronounced deficiency by the intelligence community in this task at the present time, and however much we can applaud such events as the rapprochement with China, it is well to remember ▶

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